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A social realist view of contextual disruption through (un)conferencing

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Abstract

Disruptions within higher education are seldom effortless and often provocative. They may result in a break from traditional, established educational models of knowledge transmission, offering alternative ways of accessing and cocreating knowledge. In 2021, the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) adopted an (un)conferencing methodology for its annual conference. In this paper, the association's Student Learning Project Team explores contextual disruption against the (un)conferencing backdrop. Critical reflective accounts by project-team members provide the empirical grounding for the paper. First, the notions of context and contextual disruption are discussed. Second, the reflective accounts are analysed using Archer's structure, culture, and agency, as analytical framework. Third, Archer's morphogenetic framework is used to appraise whether change or stasis occurred within the project team. Finally, recommendations for others wishing to facilitate intentional contextual disruption are shared. Ultimately, the article provides insight into the intricacies of contextual disruption as part of (un)conferencing.

Keywords: agency, contextual disruption, culture, morphogenesis, (un)conference, structure

Introduction

Contextual disruption within the field of education can result in innovations that change or displace existing models of knowledge transmission (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Garcia-Morales, et al., 2021). These innovations disrupt established educational models, offer alternative ways to access knowledge, and engage academics and students in authentic, but different ways of doing and being. Contextual disruption destabilises and redefines established educational trajectories

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with the aim to create contexts and environments that could sustain equitable opportunities for engagement (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). The paradigm of contextual disruption fosters a participatory culture with engaged participants (Carolan, et al., 2020), which serves to counteract traditional ways of knowledge transmission that often engender disabled spaces for open discussion and dialogue on research, critical issues, and prevalent challenges related to higher education. In this paper, the notion of contextual disruption serves as the conceptual framework that guides the discussion, while Margaret Archer's work on social realism acts as both the underpinning theoretical framework and the analytical framework (Archer, 1995; 1996; 2000).

As members of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) Student Learning Project Team (SLPT), we explore our journey of contextual disruption in 2021, which was aligned with the broader (un)conferencing methodology adopted by HELTASA that year over common interests (i.e., a conference). While the primary focus of the paper is on the intentional contextual disruptions that occurred, we acknowledge the unintentional broader disruption brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our discussion draws on critical self-reflections about the intentional contextual disruption we facilitated and experienced in 2021. We explore our aim of creating open spaces to share, critically reflect, be creative, and develop innovative approaches to student learning through collaboration, scholarly conversations, and research.

In relation to conferencing, contextual disruption means that engagement is participant-driven with an emphasis on contributions from every participant (Greenhill & Wiebrands, 2008). Participative engagement also provides synergies that generate authentic learning opportunities. By disrupting the status quo, we could act as catalysts for effecting change within the SLPT (Wolf, et al., 2021) and encourage participants to share their expertise in order to generate new ways of thinking about and understanding student learning. To outline how this occurred as part of the HELTASA (un)conference endeavour in 2021, we delineate how the events associated with the endeavour unfolded.

We start by providing a brief overview of the concept of student learning in HELTASA. Next, we use the theoretical lens offered by social realism to explore contextual disruption. Margaret Archer's (1995, 1996) concepts of culture, structure and agency are used to better understand the structural and cultural shifts in HELTASA that ultimately supported disruption and facilitated a change in the way student learning was understood and approached. The article culminates by offering guidelines to those seeking intentional and authentic engagements through contextual disruption of academic conferencing.

History and overview of student learning at HELTASA

HELTASA has always supported learning and teaching in higher education and has advocated for individual and collective agency across the academic landscape. Historically, HELTASA membership and engagement revolved around attending the annual conference at the end of each year. There was often a sense that momentum gained during conference engagements at the end of the year tended to dissipate once the conference ended, without being transferred

into daily academic pursuits. The student disruptions of 2015 forced higher education to acknowledge, 'it can't be business as usual' (Behari-Leak, 2015). This resulted in the structural and cultural disruption of established praxis in higher education (Vorster & Quinn, 2017). Thus, HELTASA was forced to rethink learning and teaching, pedagogical approaches towards epistemic access as well as ontological access, to champion decolonisation and disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions held in higher education (Dison, et al., 2022).

HELTASA responded by creating various Special Interest Groups (SIGs), which were reimagined and strengthened in 2015 (Skead, 2015). The aim of the SIGs was to establish communities that represented the dynamic areas of learning and teaching within higher education in southern Africa. SIGs offered the opportunity to share information, engage in discussion and develop a wider knowledge base within the various fields of interest. The Tutor/Mentor SIG and the First Year Experience (FYE) SIG focused on students in higher education. It was hoped that SIGs would drive innovation across the various fields of interest within learning and teaching through collaboration among members. SIGs were largely responsible for hosting interactive workshops and facilitating dialogue critical to the dissemination of novel and innovative ideas about learning and teaching practices during the annual HELTASA conference. The HELTASA SIG on Mentoring and Tutoring became very vocal and intentionally created opportunities to promote student peer leadership to support student learning and success[1]. Yet these interactions also tended to be limited to the HELTASA annual conference, even though some SIGs tried to meet throughout the year.

HELTASA has continuously evolved to ensure that it addresses the shifting needs of the academic project. In 2018, the HELTASA SIG on Mentoring and Tutoring became the Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) for Tutoring and Mentoring (HELTASA, 2017). The aim was for CLCs within HELTASA to be more representative and to create opportunities for collaboration and active engagement (e.g., Cupido, et al., 2022). In 2021, HELTASA once again transformed itself. This transformation was to ensure that it was relevant, responsive, and resilient (HELTASA, 2021a) and that it was still addressing the needs of academics in higher education. As part of this transformation, Scholarly Projects replaced the CLCs (HELTASA, 2021a). The Student Learning Project Team (SLPT) was formed from the merger of two CLCs: Tutoring and Mentoring and FYE. The focus of the SLPT was to generate interventions and strategies that promote holistic student care and development grounded in promoting and supporting student success[2]. It aimed to offer a holding space where practitioners could debate, collaborate, and strategise around issues pertaining to intentional and sustainable student support throughout the year. Furthermore, the SLPT aimed to promote scholarly discussion and dialogue around student

[1] See HELTSA (2015) for evidence of how the SIG on Mentoring and Tutoring used the HELTASA conference in 2015 as a platform to promote student peer leadership to the benefit of student learning and success, and the special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* on tutoring and mentoring (volume 5, number 2) that was published in 2017, tied to the HELTASA conference of 2016.

[2] While the SLPT's work has focused predominantly on undergraduate students, this has begun to shift to include postgraduates as well.

support structures in areas such as tutorials, mentorship, and coaching, FYE programmes, academic advising, and to offer opportunities for professional development in practical areas of student learning for overall student success. To promote intentional and authentic engagements, the SLPT chose to break from traditional modes of knowledge delivery (e.g., research presentations or workshops at the annual conference) and offered a series of 'Coffee Conversations', thereby disrupting the way student learning had traditionally been approached within HELTASA. These dialogic engagements served as a build up to the annual conference and were guided by the broader (un)conferencing methodology adopted by HELTASA in 2021 (HELTASA, 2021b).

Context and disruption: Clarifying terms

Disruption may be invigorating to some, but it can be 'very upsetting' (Boughey & McKenna 2021: 44) to others. Disruption within higher education contexts may even influence individuals' professional identities and how they think about their work (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Giroux (2020: 9-10) proffers that disruption (or more precisely, a pedagogy of disruption):

> … demands a critical and engaged interaction with the world we live in mediated by a responsibility for challenging structures of domination and for alleviating human suffering.

Therefore, when actively endeavouring to disrupt, the disrupter must remain cognisant of the potential consequences disruptive actions could have on people and contexts. These consequences should not curtail disruption, but rather spur it on to realise meaningful change.

Disruption cannot be separate from context. As Leibowitz, et al. (2015: 316) highlight, context is a word with diverse meanings:

> It is often used to denote disciplinary context (cf. Mathieson, 2012) or it can denote time, as in the phrase ''in current contexts'' or spheres such as ''in the political context''. In the writing on situated learning the word ''context'' suggests learning occurring through practice (Lave, 1996) with a strong emphasis on history and biography (Lave, 2012). The word ''context'' is taken up in the work of Archer (1995) to imply ''environment in which the ('macro') features of the system are either reproduced or transformed'' (Archer 1995: 11).

In this paper, we draw most strongly on Archer's use of context, which ties to social realism – the theory that underpins our investigation. In particular, we pay attention to context as the 'container' and 'shaper' of moments of strategic practice (i.e., disruption) within wider conditions of being.

Theoretical underpinning

In this paper, we draw on two elements of Margaret Archer's social realist theory (1995; 1996; 2000) to explore contextual disruptions from the perspective of the SLPT during 2021 and in the lead up to the HELTASA (un)conference in December of that year. The first is what Archer calls analytical dualism (1995), which denotes the separation of structure, culture, and agency into separate parts (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). This intentional separation allows the researcher to explore each part independently, while simultaneously being able to investigate how the parts interact with one another while ensuring the parts are not conflated (Archer, 1996; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Case (2015) explains that structure encompasses unequally distributed material goods within society, social positions, and social roles. Structures may include organisations, policies, and spaces, among other things. Culture is described as, 'the world of ideas and beliefs' (Case 2015: 843), while agency constitutes the realm of 'human action and interaction' (Case, 2015: 483) where individuals or groups may have the power to, 'change their practices, conditions or contexts' (Leibowitz, et al., 2017: 5). In social realist terms, analytical dualism affords one the opportunity to gain deeper insight into how these parts may enable or constrain change. This separation of structure, culture, and agency is used to guide the analysis of four critical reflective freewrites (Castle, 2017) by the authors, as outlined in more detail in the methodology section below.

Archer's morphogenetic framework (1995) serves as a tool with which to conduct a temporal analysis of change and is thus the second element drawn from her *oeuvre*. During a morphogenetic cycle, the researcher determines the status quo at the start of the cycle (T_1), observes the interaction of structure, culture, and agency during the cycle (T_2 to T_3), and then determines at T_4 whether morphogenesis (change) has occurred at the end of the cycle or whether the status quo remains constant (morphostasis) (Archer, 1995; Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Thus, the morphogenetic framework allows one to look at structure, culture, and agency autonomously during a specific period, while also being able to observe the interaction among the various parts to explore whether there has been change or not, and to observe any emergent properties that may have arisen during the cycle.

Methodology

This qualitative study adopts a narrative inquiry approach, which Hyvärinen (2008: 447) describes as 'a broad and polymorphous research orientation within the social sciences'. We were attracted to the narrative paradigm, as we felt it would help us gain a deeper understanding of each team member's experience of planning and implementing our strategy of (un)conferencing. Willig (2014: 147) explains that narrative research aims to explore 'versions of human experience, and indeed of social reality more generally'. This ties back to our adoption of Archer's work on social realism as the theory that underpins our investigation and arguments.

To generate the empirical data for our research, the SLPT made use of freewriting (Castle, 2017). Each member of the team engaged in an asynchronous and independent freewriting session, which was guided by prompts that aimed to stimulate reflection on team members'

experiences of the (un)conferencing endeavour in 2021. These prompts included, but were not limited to, the following: i) what are your general thoughts about the (un)conference approach adopted by HELTASA in 2021?, ii) what are your thoughts about the design, planning, and rollout of the SLPT Coffee Conversations, as well as the Coffee Conversations themselves?, iii) share your thoughts about the ways in which the SLPT engaged as a team in 2021, and iv) what are your thoughts about the processes followed during the build up to the HELTASA (un)conference in 2021, as well as of the (un)conference itself?

To ensure that team members' views were not influenced by those of the other team members, and to mitigate against potential biases linked to our positionality (see Fontaine-Rainen, et al., 2022), individual SLPT members did not read others' texts until everyone had finalised their freewriting pieces and were ready to analyse the collected information. Each member then read all other members' freewrites to make critical comments and observations, and as a means of guarding against confirmation bias. Finally, the freewrites (Castle, 2017) were analysed collectively by the SLPT members, through iterative readings that were guided by Archer's (1995; 1996; 2000) notion of structure, culture, and agency. As each of the reflective texts were no more than two pages in length, significant sections of text from each piece were weaved into the section that follows, serving to support our claims and arguments. In the few instances where data from the freewrites were omitted from the article, this was either owing to duplication of excerpts that had already been included in the article or else the text did not hold bearing to our arguments.

Separating the parts

In this section, we explore our critical self-reflections in relation to three broad themes that emerged from our iterative analysis of the four reflective texts. Theme One considers the levels of contextual disruption, while Theme Two accounts for (arguably necessary) disequilibrium brought by perpetual shifts in doing and being. Theme Three guides our discussion about the (dis)connections that permeated the contextual disruptive process. Throughout the section, we draw on Archer's (1995; 1996; 2000) structure, culture, and agency to guide the discussion.

Theme One: Levels of contextual disruption

We contend that contextual disruption occurred across three levels. The macro-level contextual disruption came in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic and can be classified as an unintentional disruption. The meso-level contextual disruption was intentional and took the form of the HELTASA (un)Conference that occurred in 2021. The final contextual disruption occurred at the micro-level within our collective as the SLPT, with parts intentional and parts unintentional. While the meso- and micro-level contextual disruptions are what is of core importance to this paper, the macro-level disruption brought about and shaped by the pandemic cannot be disregarded.

Macro level disruption: The pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic emerges as a macro-level disruption that was beyond our control.

However, it may have facilitated positive cultural and structural shifts in favour of (un)conferencing and the intentional contextual disruption the SLPT was aiming to achieve that year. Consider, for example, these excerpts from the reflections by two of our authors:

> *I realise that COVID-19 enforced a large-scale contextual disruption of how we, as a sector, worked and thought about T&L and the broader academic project … I would argue that it made the contextual disruption associated with the (un)conferencing methodology and the way the SLPT approached this process of disruption much easier.* (Freewrite 1[3]).

> *… the disruption caused by COVID resulted in innovations that might not have been possible without some of the affordances of the way of life brought about by the pandemic.* (Freewrite 4).

Yet at the same time, two of our authors observe that the pandemic's more precarious disruptive effects cannot be ignored:

> *With COVID-19 all around us, we struggled to piece together our reality. Moving forward was not an option but a need so that we could make sense of the chaos around us.* (Freewrite 3).

> *So much about life was in utter turmoil and disruption.* (Freewrite 4).

The pandemic also disrupted normative structures, where one author stated:

> *Personal and professional spaces became intertwined, placing our individual internal worlds in a precarious balancing act.* (Freewrite 3).

While the pandemic certainly forced structural changes and brought contextual disruption that was beyond anyone's control, it served as a catalyst that supported the HELTASA (un)conference and our SLPT intentional contextual disruption efforts. We argue that the types of shifts in doing and being that was enabled by the pandemic would have been far harder to achieve outside the context of the pandemic, with one author observing that it forced the sector to:

> *… figure out how to do things in new ways (e.g., online and remotely) …* (Freewrite 1).

Consequently, the pandemic helped create the macro-level disruptive conditions within which the HELTASA (un)conference and associated contextual disruption could succeed.

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[3] The freewrites were labelled Freewrite 1, Freewrite 2, Freewrite 3, and Freewrite 4, which are the codes used in the article for excerpts from the author freewrites.

Meso-level disruption: HELTASA (un)conference

Within the broader disruption brought by the pandemic, HELTASA endeavoured to (un)conference in 2021. As one of the SLPT authors explains, this caused a great deal of uncertainty and liminality, as things:

> *… often felt disorganised, disjointed and like we were learning as we progressed. This resulted in a great deal of frustration*. (Freewrite 2).

To an extent, and perhaps more so initially than in the latter half of the year, SLPT members experienced agential constraints. These were brought about, for the most part, by the uncertainty about the broader aims and objectives of the (un)conference and the (intentional) lack of structure brought by the approach. It placed pressure on the team too, as one author observes:

> *… it certainly placed additional layers of strain on the SLPT members, as we were trying to contend with the contextual disruptions at home and work (lines which had become blurred) because of the pandemic, while also having to navigate the uncertainty brought about by the intentional contextual disruption HELTASA was trying to achieve through (un)conferencing.* (Freewrite 1).

At the same time, the deliberate contextual disruption brought by (un)conferencing also challenged SLPT members' prevailing assumptions about how conferencing should occur, as the following freewrite excerpts show:

> *I had quite specific ideas about how conferencing should occur prior to the HELTASA (un)Conference in 2021.* (Freewrite 1).

> *… I was unsure of how we would apply this to a space, which has always been dominated by traditional conferencing conventions.* (Freewrite 2).

> *Disrupting the current structure of conferences was not easy, especially when addressing the well-established culture of scholarly exchange*. (Freewrite 3).

Yet the reflective pieces also evidence a clear sense of the affordances such an approach could bring:

> *… questioning the traditional structure of a conference … it was vital to shift the dominance of voice from being one-sided to rather encouraging conversations and collaboration*. (Freewrite 3).

> *… [it] provided a platform for academics to engage and participate in a manner that was authentic and gave voice to all participants using a myriad of modalities. It proved that academic rigour can be obtained albeit in a very unconventional manner*. (Freewrite 2).

> *… giving voice to students who would not usually be afforded this opportunity …* (Freewrite 1).

Consequently, the deliberate contextual disruption brought about by the HELTASA (un)conference in 2021, facilitated a structural shift in the way conferencing had been done up to that point. Similarly, there was an associated cultural shift away from the traditional approach to academic conferencing to a more collaborative and shared sense of purpose and doing (at least as observed from our perspective as the SLPT).

Micro-level disruption: SLPT collective

As a team, we embraced the dismantling of structural constraints and physical divides imposed by geography prior to the pandemic (Fontaine-Rainen, et al., 2022). As one of our authors stated, there was an urgency:

> *… to be cautious and safe during the global COVID-19 pandemic and to honour national lockdown policies (which) meant we did not have the opportunity to work together in the same space in person …* (Freewrite 4).

There was a shift away from traditional modes of engagement because of the macro-level disruption brought by the pandemic, which had in the past meant that team members would only engage once a year at the annual HELTASA conference. Thus, while the pandemic removed much that was familiar from daily life, it did offer some particularly unique and useful affordances for our SLPT. One of our authors explains that it gave:

> *… members the opportunity to interact and engage virtually on a regular basis.* (Freewrite 1).

As such, the unintended contextual disruption in how we engaged and interacted with one another informed our intentional disruption of and approach to (un)conferencing, and how we wanted to stimulate dialogic engagement among members of the association from across the higher education sector.

We endeavoured to create structures, enabled through online engagement, that would emulate for HELTASA members the sense of care and collaboration we shared during our weekly SLPT engagements, as shown in this extract from one of the freewrites:

> *The aspect of care resonated deeply with what we were encountering in our individual*

> *spaces, and we felt the need to create a safe space for others [i.e., students and staff from other institutions] to come together and share their experiences … This gave rise to the creation of the Coffee Conversation platform, a collaborative space where staff and students could vent, discuss, and release*. (Freewrite 3).

Another author observed that the Coffee Conversations served to extend the HELTASA (un)conference beyond the structural and temporal constraints of a traditional conference, endeavouring to:

> *… [engage] participants, acknowledging that we are all experts and moving away from the concept of an expert. The aim was to provide a platform where academics could engage informally about issues that affect student learning in higher education*. (Freewrite 2).

Ultimately, the Coffee Conversations began cross-institutional conversations with a range of stakeholders. One author reflects:

> *… not only allowed people to engage, but [to] learn that they were not alone; our challenges were similar if not the same. It also allowed for creative thinking of solutions, ways to address challenges and project resilience.* (Freewrite 3).

Thus, the intentional, micro-level contextual disruption facilitated by the SLPT in the form of Coffee Conversations was partially enabled by the unintentional contextual disruption brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the HELTASA (un)conference. The dismantling of structural barriers that inhibited regular and sustained engagement saw these sessions take place via online platforms, thus bringing together stakeholders from multiple institutions and allowing for shared learning about what others are doing and how they are doing it. Concomitantly, members of the SLPT experienced a sense of agential empowerment, as they embraced the breaking down of traditional barriers to engagement (Fontaine-Rainen, et al., 2022) by meeting regularly and using new ways of doing to advance their work nationally.

Theme 2: Disequilibrium

HELTASA's efforts to (un)conference and the associated contextual disruptions brought about a sense of disequilibrium for SLPT members, as these excerpts from the freewrites show:

> *… there were times that this journey was incredibly frustrating …* (Freewrite 4).

> *I will admit that I felt quite frustrated and powerless at times, trying to comprehend what was expected of me/us from the organisation.* (Freewrite 1).

> The affordance of our regular engagements though, was that we could share these

frustrations (along with many others from our personal and work lives) with others who were in a similar situation to ours. Yet, as one author observes, the sense of disequilibrium and agential constraint remained constant:

> *… we were trying to contend with the contextual disruptions at home and work … because of the pandemic, while also having to navigate the uncertainty brought about by the intentional contextual disruption HELTASA was trying to achieve …* (Freewrite 1).

Another consequence of the broader HELTASA (un)conferencing approach, meant that the associated contextual disruption extended across the HELTASA core team members, thus arguably causing a rippling of disequilibrium across the broader organisation. Consequently, two of our authors highlighted that the SLPT experienced pressures when it came to deadlines and tasks:

> *Deadlines were often tight which placed a great deal of pressure on team members*. (Freewrite 2).

> *… at times unrealistic deadlines for deliverables, shifting goal posts, changing requirements …* (Freewrite 4).

While disequilibrium should be an anticipated consequence of any disruptive effort, our contention is that the feelings of discontent and dis-ease we experienced were amplified by the unintended macro-level contextual disruption brought about by the pandemic.

Theme 3: (Dis)connection

The contextual disruptions and (un)conferencing approach brought about both efforts to create connections (i.e., enabling structures supportive of member agency) and feelings of disconnect (thus, potentially constraining member agency and disrupting the cultural status quo). On the one hand, the SLPT often felt disconnected during the (un)conferencing process, with one author mentioning:

> *We often felt left in the dark about why certain things were being done, how these things should be done, and what exactly was expected of us.* (Freewrite 1).

There was also a disconnect in terms of how we understood the (un)conference proposal review process (a principled shift from the traditional conference abstract) and how our own views and those of proposal reviewers were reconciled, as this excerpt from one of the freewrites show:

> *Although critical readers were approached to review the abstracts (proposals), feedback*

> *was often contrary to the SLPT's views … Deadlines for abstract [proposal] submission were also extended which added additional pressure.* (Freewrite 2).

The proposal review process emerges as a structural change that (at least initially) constrains SLPT agency. These occurrences led to a sense of disconnection for the SLPT from the broader organisation, with many early mornings and late afternoons spent making sense of tasks and deliverables and fulfilling necessary duties. Yet the contextual disruptions also brought opportunities to connect.

Two of the authors reflect that, as a team, the SLPT grew particularly close during 2021:

> *The relationship between core members of the SLTP is characterised by care and compassion as each one of us has invited the other into their personal space.* (Freewrite 2).

> *… we quickly formed a bond even though our engagements took place virtually*. (Freewrite 3).

This sense of connection and care formed the basis of the SLPT Coffee Conversations that year and underpinned what we wanted to achieve by engaging higher education stakeholders from across the sector, thus enabling SLPT members' agency to facilitate meaningful change. As one author explains:

> *Core members … share freely and bring themselves fully into the SLPT space. This is also what we tried to recreate with the Coffee Conversations.* (Freewrite 2).

While the SLPT at times felt disconnected from HELTASA in the months leading up to the (un)conference, the team itself attained an inspiring sense of connection with one another (Fontaine-Rainen, et al., 2022), which they used as a model for engaging stakeholders from across the sector as part of the 2021 HELTASA (un)conference.

Morphogenesis

Drawing on Archer's (1995; 1996) morphogenetic framework, we argue that a morphogenesis of the contextual status quo within the organisation was achieved and that it was enabled through numerous levels of contextual disruption. At T_1, the period just before the current SLPT was formed and began working together, HELTASA, the SIGs, and the CLCs operated in a very specific and defined way, both structurally and culturally. Conferences (a structural property) followed a more traditional academic model, while members of the SIGs and later CLCs would engage at the annual conference and perhaps via email, if needed, during the year (an example of the organisational culture at T_1). In 2021, HELTASA underwent a restructuring (i.e., a disruption of the existing structural arrangement within the organisation) and the SLPT was formed and began to interact with the macro- and meso-level contextual disruptions in progress (T_2 to T_3). It is during

this period that we observe how contextual disruptions across the various levels both enable and constrain the SLPT members' actions and agency. At the same time, through structural mechanisms, changes in ways of doing and being occurred, enabled by the pandemic and by the SLPT members' agential intentionality. Finally, at T_4, we observed a change in the regularity with which the SLPT meets and engages, the way in which SLPT members engage with other HELTASA members, and their views about (un)conferencing. Consequently, we observe a morphogenesis of the contextual status quo within the organisation, changes in the structural arrangements in the organisation (i.e., from SIGs to project teams), and shifts to a culture of inclusion and responsiveness.

In short, it would not be unfair to offer that had the SLPT come to exist at a less disruptive time in the world and indeed in higher education, its evolution into what it currently is and how it currently operates and contributes to the academic project would have been much slower or might not have occurred at all.

Meta-analytic commentary

The critical reflections explored in this article are contained to a single instance of contextual disruption, tied to the HELTASA (un)conference in 2021. These efforts were supported by the structural and associated cultural shifts within HELTASA, as mentioned earlier, which served as a container for the intentional and unintentional dimensions of contextual disruption that emerged from the freewrites.

It becomes apparent that micro-level disruption resulted in SLPT members critically interrogating their beliefs and assertions pertaining to students, curriculum, and the function and role that universities and HELTASA play in student teaching and learning (Boughey & McKenna, 2021), thus enabling member agency. These assertions had been shaped by dominant and traditional ways of thinking and doing (i.e., indicative of the cultural and structural status quo. Disruption, then, creates the space to consider alternative ways of thinking, being and doing. It enabled SLPT members' agency and helped them to recognise their own narratives, which led to the emergence of critical awareness and enabled a process of critical reflection about different ways of thinking, being and doing (Castle, 2017). The safe space (i.e., a structure) in which this occurred allowed SLPT member voices to be heard, emotions to be released, and became a place where members could bring themselves fully into the space as individuals and as part of a collective, thus fostering an enabling culture. Although SLPT members may have experienced a sense of disequilibrium and disconnect at times, their efforts were sustained by collective caring and support for one another (Fontaine-Rainen, et al., 2022), and the enabling environment that existed because the entire association was (un)conferencing that year. Unfortunately, attempts to (un)conference and disrupt context may not always occur in such an enabling environment.

The South African higher education sector is a neoliberal one (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) that remains predominantly tethered to global north notions of academia and conferencing, despite immense effort to shift to more contextually responsive, global south, African-specific ways of doing and being. This reality makes shifting culture difficult, whether within an

association, at a university, or across a higher education sector more broadly, and remains one of the greatest challenges facing the South African higher education sector. For changes that benefit students, academics, and other higher-education stakeholders to be realised, the prevailing contextual realities of the sector must be made to change. While (un)conferencing as a methodology is one way of doing so, it requires both structural and cultural shifts within the ecosystem; something that may be stymied by the often neoliberal and global north approaches that prevail within the sector. Nevertheless, we would encourage others to explore contextual disruption and (un)conferencing within their spaces as a means of shifting the status quo, with the guidelines outlined below aimed at guiding the endeavour.

Concluding remarks

In this article, we used analytical dualism and the morphogenetic framework (Archer 1995; 1996; 2000) to critically engage with self-reflective narrative freewrites (Castle, 2017) from the authors. We explored the notion of contextual disruption within the broader context of (un)conferencing, as implemented by HELTASA in 2021. Our findings highlight how contextual disruption occurred intentionally and unintentionally across macro-, meso-, and micro-levels, which brought both enabling conditions for the SLPT to engage and care for one another and others, while also constraining some of their efforts to disrupt the status quo. While HELTASA adopted (un)conferencing as the guiding principle and process for disrupting and evolving both 'what' and 'how' the organisation contributes to the academic project, the SLPT disrupted and evolved both individually (as a team) and as part of the collective (HELTASA) to promote morphogenesis in service of student learning and student success for southern Africa.

Recommendations for intentional and authentic engagements through contextual disruption

As we conclude this critical reflective account of our experiences as part of the HELTASA (un)conference endeavour in 2021, we deem it appropriate (even necessary) to share recommendations that will aid others seeking intentional and authentic engagements through contextual disruption. We separate these recommendations into two parts as shown in Table 1 below: i) those pertaining to the overarching disruptive endeavour, and ii) those pertaining to the individual(s) involved in the disruptive endeavour. However, as we have shown throughout this paper, these parts occur in proximity to one another and (more often than not) overlap. They must therefore not be viewed in isolation, but rather as closely connected parts of a whole.

These recommendations, while not exhaustive, should support efforts to realise intentional contextual disruption and could well be supplemented based on the experiences and contexts of others.

Table 1: Recommendations relating to intentional contextual disruption.

Overarching Disruptive Endeavour	Individuals Involved in the Endeavour
Foreground the fact that disruption can be destabilising for members of an organisation (Giroux, 2020) and guard against unnecessary or avoidable disequilibrium for those involved in the disruptive endeavour.	Be open to and accept that there will be some level of discomfort during this process and that this is a necessary part of contextual disruption and (un)conferencing.
Continuous communication and feedback between and among those involved in the endeavour are essential components for intentional and authentic engagements. Make intentions, ideas, and actions clear to everyone involved in the process.	Do not hesitate to engage with others involved in the disruptive endeavour or to raise frustrations and concerns. Resolving challenges or apprehensions sooner rather than later can prevent unnecessary and prolonged dissatisfaction.
Recognise and embrace that disruption happens simultaneously across micro, meso, and macro levels, and that contexts must not be viewed in isolation.	Remain alert and open to observing unexpected or unintended disruptions across micro, meso, and macro levels that may not have been anticipated.
Planning and intentionality of disruptive efforts can mitigate feelings of disconnection and frustration for those involved in the endeavour.	Drive and encourage clarity about and planning in relation to the way in which the disruption is pursued.
Create spaces that engender a sense of connection and care for everyone involved in the effort to disrupt. It is important to acknowledge all efforts from all parties continually to help foster a sense of certainty and to counter feelings of disequilibrium.	Contribute to the fostering of a caring and supportive environment for all those involved in the endeavour.

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Arthi Ramrung is a lecturer in the Teaching and Learning Development Centre at Mangosuthu University of Technology. She is actively involved in both student support and professional development. She holds a master's in chemistry and a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Education. Other qualifications include Project Management, Academic Advising and Mentoring, and Coaching. Arthi leads the First-Year Experience programme at MUT and has initiated a student peer mentorship programme. The focus of her research is on student development and holistic student support with the view of improving student success.

Danielle (Danny) Fontaine-Rainen is an innovative and collaborative thought leader and educator. She holds bachelor's, honours, and master's degrees from UCT (in Environmental and Geographical Science). She has a PhD in Urban Geography from Clark University (Worcester, MA, USA). Danny has been involved in and contributed to different aspects of higher education including teaching, research, faculty development, and first year students and students transitioning into higher education. She also has experience of project management across multiple collaborative spaces of higher education.

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